

Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

Volume 38 | Issue 1

Article 8

2014

Josephine Donovan. Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions. Fourth edition. New York: Continuum, 2012. xvi + 287 pp.

Alexandra K. Wettlaufer
University of Texas at Austin, akw@austin.utexas.edu

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Recommended Citation

Wettlaufer, Alexandra K. (2014) "Josephine Donovan. Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions. Fourth edition. New York: Continuum, 2012. xvi + 287 pp.," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 38: Iss. 1, Article 8. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1013>

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Abstract

Review of Josephine Donovan. *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions*. Fourth edition. New York: Continuum, 2012. xvi + 287 pp.

Keywords

feminist theory

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As CNN queries “Where are all the millennial feminists” (11 November 2012) and the “Who Needs Feminism?” page on Facebook has more than 26,000 “Likes,” the publication of Josephine Donovan’s revised and expanded fourth edition of *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions* seems as timely today as it did when it first appeared in 1985. Indeed, the debates over women’s rights, the struggle for gender equality, and even the definition of feminism itself have continued unabated in the course of the past thirty years, despite the repeated claims of the movement’s untimely demise in the popular press. (See, for example, *Time* magazine, which has announced the “death of feminism” no fewer than 119 times since 1969.) Even as the twenty-first century has witnessed the election of women as President or Prime Minister of seventeen nations around the globe—a sign one might imagine bodes well for women’s political equality—oppression and violence against women continues unabated worldwide, leading *The New York Times* to declare “Women’s Rights Are the Cause of Our Time” (August 17, 2009).

In her preface to the first edition, Donovan explained that this “teaching book” emerged as “the result of a seminar on feminist theory” (xv), and one of the volume’s many strengths is its lucid presentation of the trajectory of American feminism at a level readily accessible to undergraduates. Tracing the history of feminism through the various “waves” and subsequent “backlashes,” Donovan does an admirable job in locating the intellectual, social, and philosophical roots of feminist theories from the Enlightenment to the present day. The first chapter, “Enlightenment Liberal Feminism,” begins with the “theoretical origins of the natural rights doctrine” (2) and the exclusion of women from these “natural rights” within a Newtonian world view that associated men with the rational realm of the public sphere while women, “presupposed lacking in rationality...were excluded from the role of citizens” (5). Presenting the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, Sarah Grimké, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and other early feminists within the context of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political philosophy allows Donovan to locate their various arguments for female equality and suffrage within a framework based on rationality, reason, and the natural right of every human to the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness, while at the same time setting up the terms for subsequent theories and discussions. The latter half of the chapter explores the development of the liberal tradition in the nineteenth century, from the complicated connections between the women’s rights movement and abolition to the utilitarian arguments for gender equality in John Stuart Mill’s *The Subjugation of Women* (1869) and Harriet Taylor’s “Enfranchisement of Women” (1851). Here, as in all of the

chapters, Donovan concludes her discussion with an assessment of the weaknesses of the respective approaches, stating for example “there are some basic problems with Enlightenment feminist theory” (26) or later identifying “the fatal flaw... in all Marxist theory to date” (78). While the points are often well taken, it is just as often jarring for the reader of an historical overview to confront evaluative or even critical statements that reflect a highly subjective position and the twenty/twenty gaze of twenty-first-century hindsight.

The second chapter shifts to what Donovan calls “Nineteenth-Century Cultural Feminism,” that is, the theories and movements less concerned with political than “cultural transformation” and social reform (31). If the Enlightenment Liberal feminist position grew out of a belief in a shared human essence that rendered men and women equal, cultural feminists, according to Donovan, embrace what we might today call an “essentialist” position, emphasizing the differences between men and women, while insisting on the positive effect of “feminine” qualities (pacifism, harmony, nurture) upon society. Although the focus of *Feminist Theory* is on the Anglo-American intellectual traditions, this chapter would be enhanced by the inclusion of some of the French utopian movements of the 1830s (Saint-Simonism, for example) that shaped feminism on both sides of the Atlantic in significant ways. Indeed, the assertion that Margaret Fuller’s *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* “initiated the cultural feminist tradition” (32) in 1845 elides fifteen years of continental feminist thought that influenced Fuller and her American sisters. One the great challenges of limiting a study of feminism to a single culture is the cross-cultural nature of the movement or, at least within the context of her study, the constant interchange of ideas and influences between European and American women. Although there are some references to continental thought in Donovan’s study, a better sense of the ongoing intercultural dialogue would have been useful here and throughout *Feminist Theory*.

Shifting from chronology to thematics, the next three chapters look at “Feminism and Marxism,” “Feminism and Freudianism,” and “Feminism and Existentialism.” In each case, Donovan devotes at least half the chapter to explaining the fundamentals of these theories or philosophies, while the feminist practitioners are given rather short shrift in discussions that range from a few sentences to a few paragraphs. These three chapters are the least satisfying from a theoretical standpoint, in part because of the necessarily reductive nature of the overviews of Marxist, Freudian, and existentialist thought. Admittedly, students unfamiliar with theory may need precisely this level of background, but for anyone interested in a more fully developed analysis, these sections feel a bit rushed.

The final section of the study is the most successful, as Donovan takes us through the “Radical Feminism” of the 1960s and 70s (chapter 6), “Twentieth-

Century Cultural Feminism” (chapter 7), and “Into the Twenty-first Century: Gynocriticism, Postmodernism, the Third Wave, Global Feminism, Ecofeminism” (chapter 8). These chapters, focusing on a decade or two, rather than a century or two, have a far greater coherence and internal logic that allows the reader to more fully grasp the intricacies of these diverse feminist theories and practices. One might quibble about the relative importance bestowed upon some feminists (Mary Daly and Catherine MacKinnon, for example) at the expense of others, and with Donovan’s contention that ecofeminism is “the most vital” direction in which contemporary feminism is heading (209), but this readable introduction to feminist theory manages to cover a remarkable amount of material in 200 pages with insight, verve, and intelligence. This fine resource belongs in the collection of the next generation of feminists as an invaluable primer on the history of the intellectual roots of the movement.

Alexandra K. Wettlaufer
University of Texas at Austin